

## WORKPLACE VIOLENCE AND THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

Workplace or occupational violence has become an increasingly serious problem throughout all segments of our society. Because of their sheer size and the number of persons within the university community, colleges and universities are particularly vulnerable to the problem of workplace violence.

Workplace violence is an increasingly common phenomenon. Persons use to resolve their differences by talking about them. Now, they often resort to violence as an initial problem-solving technique.

### Ways to Prevent Workplace Violence

- **Teach conflict resolution skills to employees** - Teach employees who deal directly with students how to recognize hostility or anger and steps or measures to diffuse the perceived hostility and aggression.
- **Teach customer service orientation** - Have a pro-active program directed toward customer service orientation; this may serve to diffuse a student's anger or hostility.
- **Zero tolerance for weapons on campus** - The University of Arizona has a well publicized policy that allows for zero tolerance for weapons of any kind on campus. The policy clearly delineates sanctions for violations.
- **Duress alarms** - Offices or facilities that serve students and have a potential for violent behavior may install silent duress alarms that are monitored at the campus law enforcement dispatch department.
- **Design of office facilities** - Campus offices or facilities that serve students and have a potential for violent behavior should have wide waist- to chest-high service counters that would make it difficult for the customer to physically contact the service representative.
- **Use of CCTV and audio monitoring** - Campus offices or facilities that serve students and have a potential for violent behavior may be equipped with closed-circuit television cameras directed toward the service counter and/or audio (voice) monitoring equipment. Such CCTV and audio recording equipment may be monitored in a nearby supervisor's office (for backup and support). The visual and audio recordings of conflict may serve as a benefit in possible student disciplinary proceedings or in a criminal prosecution. The visual presence of a CCTV camera may also serve as a deterrent to violent behavior.
- **Student disciplinary process** - Physical or verbal aggression toward employees by students should not be tolerated. Such behavior should not be acceptable. Students who demonstrate such behavior, but stop short of violations of criminal law that warrant prosecution, should be referred to the student disciplinary system or have student disciplinary sanctions imposed.
- **Advise employees of counseling services** - Ensure that all employees are advised of available counseling and employee assistance programs that are available. Encourage employees to report incidents. When an employee has obtained an emergency protection order directed toward an estranged or recently divorced spouse, ex-boyfriend, family member, etc., The University of Arizona Police Department should be notified. The department, in turn, will notify its officers of the order. Representatives of the department may meet with the person who has obtained the Order and his/her supervisor to help plan for contingencies.
- **Non-harassment policy** - A clearly written campus-wide policy has been developed that prohibits intimidation and harassment in the workplace. Employees should read this policy.

**Criminal Prosecution** - According the Arizona law, individuals can be charged with disorderly conduct, assault, terroristic threatening, etc. for acts of violence directed toward campus employees.

## **Types of Campus Workplace Violence**

There are essentially three primary types of categories of workplace violence that occur on college or university campuses:

### **1. Student vs. employee**

Students may display verbally or physically aggressive behavior. toward campus employees.

Some possible examples include:

- a. Office of Student Financial Aid - students fails to receive anticipated check or funds.
- b. Student Affairs - student receives discipline and reacts violently.
- c. Student Housing - student is admonished for loud music in room and strikes the Resident Manager or Resident Assistant.
- d. Parking Office - student reacts violently when assessed a parking fine, vehicle is towed, or parking citation is denied.
- e. Bursar's Office - student reacts violently to a problem with his/her accounts receivable.
- f. Academic Advisor - student becomes aggressive when desired classes are not available.

There can be many more examples of students demonstrating violent behavior toward employees in an academic environment. It can be anticipated that the trend of youth becoming more violent will continue. Young adults are prone to become violent over trivial matters and the number of young adults, demographically, is increasing.

### **2. Third-party intrusion into the workplace**

According to recent research, the greatest potential for workplace violence occurs when a person who is not a member of the campus community (student, faculty or staff member) enters the workplace.

This can be the estranged or recently divorced husband/ex-boyfriend/wife or the emotionally disturbed person. With increased emphasis upon domestic violence or abuse, an increasing number of persons (usually women) are obtaining *emergency protection orders or emergency restraining orders directed* toward persons with whom they have had a domestic relationship or a relationship involving misdirected affection. This situation often spills over into the workplace.

### **3. Disgruntled employees**

The disgruntled employee usually directs acts of violence toward co-workers, supervisors, or managers. The motive for the acts of violence is usually revenge. Violent employees usually believes:

1. Something very important has been taken away from them:
  1. Promotion
  2. Raise
  3. Assignment or transfer
2. The organization has a moral obligation to provide that which was taken away.
3. If the organization does not give it to them, they are willing to risk everything to strike back.
4. The violence includes injury to co-workers as well as to the violent employees.

### **When are employees under stress?**

Students have shown there are times in our lives when the greatest degree of stress is created. These times are:

- When there is a death in the family
- When undergoing a divorce
- Loss of job
- During a physical move

If supervisor or co-worker understands when people experience stress in their lives, they can tailor or modify their actions accordingly.

### **"Red flags" or warning signs**

There are a number of "**red flags**" or **warning signs** related to the person who commits an act of workplace violence. They may include the following.

- History of violent behavior
- Fascination with weaponry and/or acts of violence
- Carrying a concealed weapon
- Verbal, non-verbal, or written threats or intimidation
- Obsessive involvement with the job
- Unwanted romantic interest in co-worker
- Paranoid behavior
- Un-accepting of criticism
- Holds a grudge
- Recent family, financial and/or personal problem
- Talks about past killings/violence
- Tests limits of acceptable behavior
- Stress in the workplace such as layoffs, RIFs, and labor disputes
- Little tolerance of others
- Gets away with unacceptable job performance ratings
- Fond of violent films and TV shows
- Non-communicator - loner
- Extreme reactions to new policies - has a hard time with authority figures change in quality of work
- Very neat or very sloppy - or sudden change
- Lies, exaggerates or over reacts on a regular basis
- Self centered or aloof
- Withdrawal of funds
- Expressions of a plan to hurt himself or others
- Externalization of blame

- Taking up much of supervisor's time with behavior or performance problems
- Drastic change in belief system
- Displays of unwarranted anger
- Feelings of being victimized
- Intoxication of alcohol or other substances
- Expressions of hopelessness or heightened anxiety
- Productivity and/or attendance problems
- Violence towards inanimate objects
- Steals or sabotages projects or equipment
- Lack of concern for the safety of others

### **Personal conduct to minimize workplace violence**

Follow these suggestions in your daily interactions with people to de-escalate potentially violent situations. If at any time a person's behavior starts to escalate beyond your comfort zone, disengage.

#### **DO**

- T Project calmness: move and speak slowly, quietly, and confidently.
- T Be an empathetic listener: encourage the person to talk, and listen patiently.
- T Focus your attention on the other person to demonstrate that you are interested in what he or she has to say.
- T Maintain a relaxed yet attentive posture and position yourself at a right angle rather than directly in front of the other person.
- T Acknowledge the person's feelings. Indicate that you can see he or she is upset.
- T Ask for small, specific favors such as asking the person to move to a quieter area.
- T Use delaying tactics which will give the person time to calm down. For example, offer a drink of water (in a disposable cup).
- T Be reassuring and point out options. Break big problems into smaller, more manageable problems.
- T Accept criticism in a positive way. When a complaint might be true, use statements like "You're probably right" or "It was my fault". If the criticism seems unwarranted, ask clarifying questions.
- T Ask for his or her recommendations. Repeat what you feel he or she is requesting of you.
- T Arrange yourself so that a visitor cannot block your access to an exit.

#### **DO NOT**

- T Use styles of communication that generate hostility, such as apathy, brush off, coldness, condescension, robotism, going strictly by the rules, or giving the runaround.
- T Reject all of a person's demands from the start.
- T Pose in challenging stances, such as a standing directly opposite someone, hands on hips, or crossing your arms.
- T Avoid any physical contact, finger-pointing, or long periods of fixed eye contact.
- T Make sudden movements that can be seen as threatening. Notice the tone, volume, and rate of your speech.
- T Challenge, threaten, or dare the individual. Never belittle the person or make him or her feel foolish.
- T Criticize or act impatiently toward the agitated individual.

- T Attempt to bargain with a threatening individual
- T Try to make the situation seem less serious than it is.
- T Make false statements or promises you cannot keep.
- T Try to impart a lot of technical or complicated information when emotions are high.
- T Take sides or agree with distortions.
- T Invade the individual's personal space. Make sure there is a space of 3' to 6' between you and the person.

## **Conclusion**

Nothing is more important to a university than the safety and security of its employees, students and visitors. Threats, threatening behavior, or acts of violence against employees, visitors, guests or other individuals by anyone on university property will not be tolerated. Violations of this policy will lead to disciplinary action which may include dismissal, arrest and prosecution.

Any person who makes substantial threats, exhibits threatening behavior, or engages in violent acts on university property shall be removed from the premises as quickly as safety permits and shall remain off the university premises pending the outcome of an investigation. The university will initiate an appropriate response. This response may include, but is not limited to, suspension and/or termination or any employment relationship, reassignment of job duties, suspension or termination of employment, and/or criminal prosecution of the person or persons involved.

All university personnel are responsible for notifying their supervisor or manager of any threats they have witnessed, received, or have been told that another person has witnessed or received. Even without an actual threat, personnel should also report any behavior they have witnessed which they regard as threatening or violent when that behavior is job related or might be carried out on a university-controlled site, or is connected to university employment. Employees are responsible for making this report regardless of the relationship between the individual who initiated the threat or threatening behavior and the person or persons who were threatened or were the focus of the threatening behavior.

The university understands the sensitivity of the information requested and has developed confidentiality procedures which recognize and respect the privacy of the reporting employee(s).

